

The Many Faces of Postcolonialism: Poland After 1989

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Abstract

In 2000 the Polish-American slavacist Eva Thompson, inspired by seminal works of Edward Said, proposed to adapt elements of the postcolonialism theory to Poland, a former Soviet satellite. Since then this concept has been applied across several research areas, for example in literature (Cavanagh, 2003), political geography (Kuus, 2004), anthropology (Owczarzak, 2009) or sociology (Mayblin et al., 2014), not to mention the (over)use in popular press and political debates.

The premise of these works, in the context of Poland or more broadly of Eastern Europe, is to give more insight into issues that are in some ways related to the lift of the Iron Curtain in 1989. The claimed applicability varies from discussing cultural influences to explaining tensions in bilateral relations within the European Union.

I will give a cross-disciplinary overview of attempts applying elements of post-colonial theory in the existing literature. This will be illustrated on selected experiences of Poland (economic transformation, social stigma, European Union integration, public discourse) over past 30 years.

Keywords:

Postcolonial Theory · Poland's Transformation 1989 · Iron Curtain

1 Introduction

Polish Revolution 1989 As we know, the revolution of 1789 is unanimously called the “French Revolution” and the revolution of 1917 the “Russian Revolution”, but it seems unlikely that we will ever call the revolution of 1989 the “Polish Revolution”. After almost thirty years of the end of communism, the dominant image is German rather than Polish: we assume that the fall of the Berlin Wall is a symbol for a peaceful revolution, but its gates were opened under pressure. Poland wanted to go a different way, when Gorbachev announced in December 1988 that the Soviet Union would no longer defend communism in its satellite states by force, Poland's communists were the first to test the waters. There were round-table talks between Polish communists and Oppositionists from Solidarity, and this resulted the ‘round-table talks’ in

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September 1989 Poland established a new government with Tadeusz Mazowiecki as a prime minister. Since then, we can talk about the “Polish Revolution” in all possible areas.

Poland’s historical ballast Despite this remarkable success, being a Russian satellite for a long duration (since end of XVII century to 1989 with 20 years break) left its mark on the Polish people. Two centuries without complete independence have influenced the way Poland is perceived outside, the way Polish people shape their identity and eventually impact decisions taken at personal, regional and international level. Those impacts are clearly visible, up to the present day, across multiple dimensions, particularly cultural, social, political and economic.

Postcolonial theory The complexity of a long term effects of being subjected to political or cultural hegemony has been widely studied in the context of nationalities who used to be subordinated to colonial rules. This line of research started by Edward Said with his seminal book "Orientalism" [Sai79]. Followed by a number of subsequent works, particularly Spivak [Spi85] and Bhabha [Bha97], it emerged into *postcolonial theory*. The field has spread across wide spectrum of scientific disciplines, being suitably adapted depending on needs (humanities and social sciences, law, medieval studies, theology, sociology), to mention only a few. The broad postcolonial perspective has been synthesized over years by Robert Young, who grounded solid philosophical basics [You03] and more recently discussed evolution and future of postcolonial thinking [You12]. While the narration of the classical postcolonial theory (as developed by Said) focuses on physical experience of colonialism, the contemporary view expands into a critique of neocolonialism understood as different forms of exploitation and inequalities [You09]. There are two particularly important points that Young rises. First, postcolonial theory doesn’t promise to give quantitative answers

"Postcolonial theory, however, is not a theory in the scientific sense, that is a coherently elaborated set of principles that can predict the outcome of a given set of phenomena. Nor is it even a theory as understood by the social sciences, which is a methodology to be utilized for the analysis of empirical data" [You09].

Second, it is more a framework rather than a set of well-grounded principles

Postcolonial theory does not involve a single set of ideas, or a single practice (...) For much of postcolonial theory is not so much about static ideas or practices, as about the relations between ideas and practices: relations of harmony, relations of conflict, generative relations between different peoples and their cultures [You09].

Thus the postcolonial theory is more a tool for meta-analysis or a convenient language to frame problems, rather than a complete scientific theory.

Discussing in detail the development and current state of this field is beyond the scope of this article, particularly because of the variety of underlying and related concepts. For example the issues of exploitation and inequality are addressed by the *World Systems Theory* [Wal93], which considers center-peripheries relations (which can be seen in some sense as a generalization of the 'self-other' relation in the classical postcolonial theory). However the differences are not big when one focuses on the key points, rather than on the terminology and geography. This broad perspective is not only typical for scientists working on foundations (like Young) but also visible in public philosophical discourses [Ati16].

Interested readers are encouraged to consult the references, particularly [KR17] for an overview.

Terminology The terms 'postcolonial', 'postdependence' and 'neocolonial' are often used to describe related concepts, almost interchangeably. The difference is usually more a matter of terminology rather than in describing fundamentally different relations [Tho14]. For example, when discussing the consequences of the former soviet domination one usually uses the term 'postcolonial' [Tho00a], while the critique of the transformation refers to the dependency upon foreign capital as "neocolonialism" [Kie12].

2 Postcolonial Poland

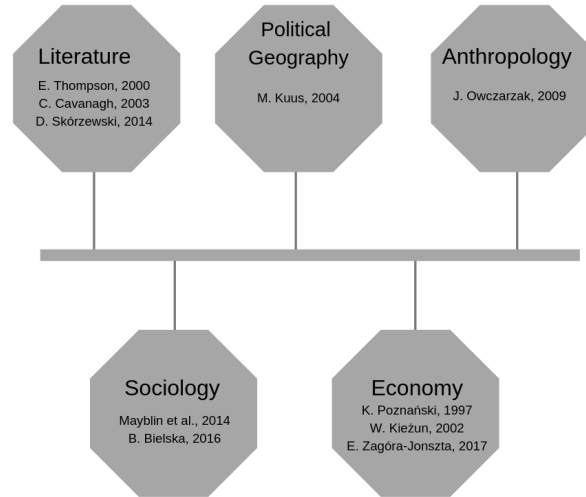


Figure 1. Applications of postcolonial theory to Poland.

Literature and Culture It is surprising, as much of the world is ‘postcolonial’, more than tree-quarters of the people living in the world today have had their lives shaped by the shared experience of colonialism. It is easy to see how important this has been in the political and economic spheres, but its general influence on the perceptual frameworks of contemporary peoples is often less evident. Literature offers one of the most important ways in which these new perceptions are expressed [AGT03]. Examples are the novels of Jane Austen in the context of British colonialism [Sai79], or those of Leo Tolstoy when it comes to the Russian imperialism (Russian domination and superiority over caucasian cultures [Tho00a]).

The concept of adapting postcolonial theory to Central and East Europe was proposed by Ewa Thompson, the Polish-American slavist. She argues that the partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century and occupation of Poland by Soviet Russia after the Second World War were forms of colonialism. Since Thompson’s seminal work "Imperial knowledge: Russian literature and colonialism" [Tho00b], the idea of postcolonial Poland, was followed by others researches not only in the context of literature, but also in sociology, economy and more areas.

Somewhat surprisingly, some of the counter-replies strongly rejected (and oppose until the present day) the idea of applying elements of postcolonial theory to Poland. Not only the postcolonial framework is used worldwide when studying specific consequences of long-lasting political domination (the Balkans [Nja12], Baltic countries [Kel06], Greenland [Gad14], Ireland [LM97]), but it has never been a limited set of rules, as emphasized by Young [You09], and adaptation attempts should not be a priori questioned.

Clare Cavanagh in her article “Post-colonial Poland” [Cav04] offerfs two explanations why polish researches are reluctant to adapt postcolonial theory to the polish literature. First of all, the postcolonial theory and the Soviet Union are both grounded on Marxism [KR17], and moreover the Soviet Union used to actively support anti-colonial movements and subversive actions around the world, particularly in South America. For postcolonial researchers it is hard to imagine that the Soviet Union, with its official anti-imperialistic and anti-colonial agenda, might have well been a *colonizer* at the same time (this argument applies to postcolonial researchers in general). Second, the narration of Poland subordinated and still, despite the formal independence, showing symptoms of the colonial syndrome does not fit well the sentiment towards its glorious past (the Kingdom of Poland was particularly powerful between the XIV and XVII centuries), which is quite popular in Poland (also related to the so called *Sarmatian myth*).

Anthropology Anthropologists hope to shed the light on dichotomies either transboundary (‘East vs West, ‘Cold War’) or domestic (tensions in society), drawing on the postcolonial studies. Researches frame those dichotomies within postcolonial concepts such as ‘self’ and ‘other’, depending on needs.

Owczarzak [Owc09] argues that certain actions of state are deeply influenced by a vision of the only right sexuality and gender roles the state has created.

This issue was remarkably visible in the People's Republic of Poland and still persists in the post-Soviet Polish society. Interestingly the attitude towards the Soviet legacy can be very ambiguous. For example, sexual education remains (as it was in the Soviet times) a taboo while women formerly encouraged to take male jobs (a woman tractor driver) face social pressure calling them to focus on the domestic sphere 'naturally reserved for women'. The latter one seems to be a correction to socialist-era policies [Owc09].

Buchowski points out that there is wide belief, those who failed to adapt to the totally different post-transformation environment, (low skilled work forces, who lost jobs) are stigmatized [Buc06]. They are portrayed as *losers*, lazy, incompetent and not proactive enough, but it is oversimplifying as it more depends on global circumstances rather than individuals. This belief, in context of transformation, particularly Poland changing its attitude to the West, that being successful depends upon an individual, may be the *internalized* myth of American Dream. The American vision of capitalism won the hearts of Polish society, to the extent that they started imitating the behaviour of the West. It may resemble the concept of *mimicry* in the postcolonial theory [Spi85].

Sociology Sociologists hope that postcolonial theory may help them to understand low ethnic diversity in Poland. Mayblin and al. in their work 'Other' Posts in 'Other' Places: Poland through a Postcolonial Lens? [MPV16] tried to understand how the 'postcolonial syndrome' can affect the ethnic diversity in Poland, especially in Warsaw. They propose a 'triple relation', the relation to Russia, the relation to 'the West' as an alternative ideological hegemony (about the same hegemony; surrogate hegemony speaks Thompson), and the relation to 'the East', including those living in the pre-war Polish territories. The triple relation set out in their article provides a novel frame for comprehending Polish identity within the context of three key external influences, drawing upon some of the central tropes of postcolonial theory.

Economy While anthropologists, when speaking about Polish transformation, study its domestic consequences, economists focus on international influences and dependencies. Kieżun in Pathology of transformation [Kie12] suggests post-Soviet Poland most closely resembled postcolonial Africa. A new Polish democratic government had not the strategic development plan how to change the communist economic to capital one. Political leaders were completely unprepared for competition with the free market economy, they did not have experience and knowledge in field of management and organizations [Kie12]. There was Balcerowicz plan, a kind of 'shock therapy', which had envisaged quick privatisation, often for underestimated prices. Thank to this, Poland became a sort of eldorado for global capitalists [Kie12].

Political discourse Political elites in Poland are sometimes criticized for being overly enthusiastic and not enough assertive with regards to the broadly

understood *West*. The West here is a symbolic term which describes a powerful counterpart of a relation, which is taking advantage of its dominant position, and can be the European Union, the United States or global corporations. Some attribute this lack of self-esteem, self-reliance and a sort of inferiority complex to the colonial mentality, namely that Poland has not learned yet to live and act on its own and seeks to be dependent upon some external power, the *surrogate hegemon* [Tho07]. It is important to stress that the form of domination or dependency criticized here is much more subtle than in the classical colonial relation, as it is based on the *soft power* [Nie17].

Examples include the critique of the EU for overusing its *soft power* [MPY18; zmi14], the critique of weak protection against the global capital during and after the transformation [Poz01]. It is worth highlighting that the critique of exploitation by the *big* capital, seen as a form of colonialism, is not reserved to socialists but appears among small enterprises and private investors, who find themselves in a worst position than the privileged foreign capital [Zie18]. These examples are not unique to Poland, the postcolonial theory has been used to study unequal power relations within the process of the EU enlargement in case of Croatia [Oba08] and Romania [Fil16].

Postcolonialism in transformation critique Transformation 1989 was and still is widely criticized by economists, particularly by Kieżun [Kie12] and Poznański [Poz01]. Both indicate that quick and ill-considered measures might cause damage to Polish economic, society and politics made new social problems. For example the fall of state companies created sharply rising unemployment, deepening stratification of individual income and built areas of poverty [Zag17].

A strong barrier to economic growth may be the low level of *social capital*. Płowiec argues that one of the most negative effects of transformation is alienation of citizens from the public discussion and resulting from it the feeling that it does not belong to them, that they have no influence over it. That alienation creates the situation strengthening *civic passivity*, inability to collect a social capital and the lack of community ties [Pło04].

3 Conclusion

The postcolonial theory has been generalized well beyond its original scope. Some controversies around the applicability seem to be caused by researchers themselves, who seek for the Holy Graal: a framework which is both universal and detail-level specific. Postcolonial theory, understood broadly with awareness of its philosophical bases, undoubtedly offers valuable insights into the issues of domination and power in the world we live in nowadays. However one should not be disappointed that it does not have predictive capabilities or that it appears to lead to different conclusions depending on a chosen perspective. After all, it was developed to understand *others* points of view.

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